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2018

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Holm , G 2018 , ' Justice through education in the Nordic countries: critical issues and perspectives ' , Education Inquiry , vol. 9 , no. 1 , pp. 1-3 . <https://doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2018.1429770>

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<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/239658>

<https://doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2018.1429770>

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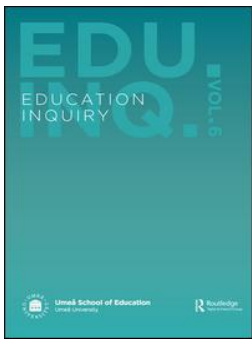
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# Justice through education in the Nordic countries: critical issues and perspectives

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To cite this article: Gunilla Holm (2018) Justice through education in the Nordic countries: critical issues and perspectives, Education Inquiry, 9:1, 1-3, DOI: [10.1080/20004508.2018.1429770](https://doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2018.1429770)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2018.1429770>



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Published online: 06 Feb 2018.



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## Justice through education in the Nordic countries: critical issues and perspectives

The Nordic countries are often listed at the top in indexes of the happiest, most democratic and most equal and fair countries in the world (<https://www.nordforsk.org/en/programmes-and-projects/projects/reimagining-norden-in-an-evolving-world-renew-an-excellence-hub-in-research-education-and-public-outreach>), and they are in many ways considered a model for the rest of the world. In the announcement of the new Nordic university research hub ReNew “Reimagining Norden in an Evolving World”, the Nordic region is described as follows:

The Nordic region has attracted renewed global interest during the last decade. Recognized for the competitiveness and innovation, combined with a high level of equality and well-being, the Nordic model is proclaimed e.g. by the Economist as “The Next Supermodel”. Topping many global indexes in terms of happiness, competitiveness and equality, the Nordic states have featured as models in many debates over e.g. gender policy and social investment in the EU and beyond. (<http://www.justed.org/university-of-helsinki-receives-4-million-euros-for-nordic-research/>)

In this special issue, we are raising questions about whether the Nordic countries constitute a supermodel with regard to education, and in particular, with regard to justice-related issues in education.

The Nordic countries have a long tradition of fair and equal educational systems that aim to provide equal access to education irrespective of social status, economic situation, gender, language, religious or ethnic background. With a Nordic ethos of equality, together with a well-functioning democracy and economic resources, it has been possible for the Nordic states to be at the forefront in promoting justice through education. However, the Nordic understandings of the aims of justice through education and of how justice through education is attained have changed during the last decades. Recently, in the Nordic countries and globally, the global discourses and local educational policies have been influenced by the dynamics of globalisation and marketisation. Along with these global trends, the Nordic countries and the Nordic educational systems have experienced the effects of market-oriented competition, social stratification, marginalisation and social exclusion. Therefore, it is vital to research issues of justice in and through education in the Nordic countries today. How do Nordic educational structures, cultures as well as teaching and learning practices, constrain or further justice in the globalising Nordic welfare states? This is the umbrella question of the Nordic Centre of Excellence “Justice through Education” (JustEd).

An overall aim of JustEd is to contribute to the re-formulation of what the project of democratic, inclusive education for justice can be in the middle of current political, economic and cultural transformation. The research in JustEd is centred around three thematic areas: (1) governance, politics and marketisation changes in the Nordic

understanding of justice through education; (2) justice through educational practices – analysing innovative cultures of teaching and learning in Nordic contexts; and (3) enabling and constraining justice in education: agency, marginalisation and diversity. JustEd has conducted research on these themes in and across the Nordic countries. The research across countries shows that there are many similarities and common values underlying the Nordic educational systems. However, the research also points to notable differences in how similar challenges are experienced and handled in different Nordic countries.

N.C.o.E. JustEd (2013–2018, [www.justed.org](http://www.justed.org)) is part of the NordForsk programme “Education for tomorrow” and this special issue of *Education Inquiry* is based on research done within the N.C.o.E., which is a multidisciplinary, cross-national research group. The N.C.o.E. is coordinated by the University of Helsinki and has 14 partners, namely Aalborg University, Østfold College, Oslo and Akershus University College, Sciences Po, The Finnish Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, Umeå University, University of Copenhagen, University of Gothenburg, University of Helsinki, University of Iceland, University of Melbourne, University of Oslo, University of Turin and University of Turku.

The so-called Nordic model of education where equality and equity constitute an important foundation is being questioned due to recent developments such as marketisation and school choice (Lundahl, 2016). Many recently published articles and books (for example, Arnesen, Lahelma, Lundahl, & Öhrn, 2014; Beach & Dyson, 2016; Kantasalmi & Holm, 2017; Sahlberg, 2015) focus on equality and equity in education in a specific Nordic country, but there is less comparative and cross-cultural research on inequalities and inequities in education encompassing several Nordic countries. In JustEd, we are interested in the ways that recent and current policies and practices undermine or even destroy the foundation of equality and equity, but also in how they can work to support and further a just educational system across the Nordic countries. Consequently, in this special issue, there are seven articles and a report focused on educational policies, structures and practices supporting or constraining the goal of having socially just educational systems in the Nordic countries. The articles focus on different educational stages from the comprehensive school to vocational and secondary schools, and to higher education. The articles examine a variety of justice-related issues such as the importance of marketisation, intercultural education, and marginalisation in the educational systems. They are written from different theoretical perspectives ranging from Foucauldian perspectives to critical intercultural education. The articles are likewise written from a variety of methodological perspectives, such as different kinds of discourse analyses to meta-ethnography. Hence, among the authors of these articles, the different perspectives indicate that there are many ways of defining and researching social justice issues in education.

The basis for the articles is the research done within JustEd. The point of departure has been around 600 peer-reviewed articles and books published between 2013 and early 2017 in JustEd. However, the writing teams have connected this research to other Nordic and international research, dating in some cases as far back as 2000. The foci of the articles are very different, but they are all connected to justice in or through education in the three thematic areas of JustEd mentioned above. Some of the articles are review articles (such as the article on marginalisation discourses by Pihl et al.), while

others discuss original comparative research (e.g. the article by Klette et al. on student engagement). Beach et al. focus on a particular kind of justice, namely educational and spatial justice with regard to urban and rural education. The article by Mikander et al. analyses the concept of intercultural education in relation to social justice education. Hakala et al. explore in particular how the emergence and development of the field of disability studies can contribute to educational and social justice. Nylund et al. have studied the implications of the academic–vocational divide in secondary schools for social class and gender inequalities. Dovemark et al. question in their article whether there still is a Nordic model because of how political changes like deregulation, marketisation and privatisation produce institutional and social segregation. Finally, there is a discussion paper on the access and stratification in higher education in the Nordic countries by Isopahkala-

Bouret et al. This discussion paper also questions whether there still is a Nordic model of equal access to higher education due to gender, immigrant background, age and class disparities.

The articles in this special issue provide an overview of several different areas where we need research in order to sustain and support equality and equity as the foundation for the educational systems in the Nordic countries. It is vital that we examine policies, structures and practices critically with regard to their roles in constraining or enabling justice in and through education.

## Funding

This work was supported by the NordForsk [project no. 57741].

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